

THE NEEDS FOR CROSS CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING**Dr. Effendy Gultom, MA**Department of English Language Teaching, the University of Riau, Pekanbaru
effendygultom@gmail.com**Abstract**

In this globalization era, people from different countries need to understand each other in order to have good communication and relationships and hence reduce the problems of misunderstanding. In line with the technological progress and development, people can easily move from one part of the earth to another part of the world either to do business or go for vacation. For that reason, people need to be able to speak international languages. One of them is English. In Indonesia English is taught in schools and courses to enable the learners to use the language well. Our government considers English as an international language very important to learn because we can get better development progress when many people have good English competence. We can absorb new knowledge in business, science, and technology using our English competence. As we know, language is a part of culture. Therefore, learners need to understand the culture of the native speakers of the language being learned so that they can gain good competence in the language. The more we understand the culture, the better we will perform in using the language. Everybody will probably agree that we need to live in peace and gain prosperity. One way to keep peace and avoid conflict is to have cross cultural understanding. Although we believe that human beings were born equal, we realize that we have different habits and customs. Every culture has its own value system that governs the behaviors of the members. The differences between cultures can cause conflicts due to misunderstanding between different nationalities, religions, or ethnic groups.

Keywords: Needs, Cross, Cultural, Understanding.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cross cultural understanding is a study to bridge two cultures or customs between countries, which aims to gain an understanding of cultural differences and similarities between the two countries. Cross Cultural Understanding can also refer to the insights of cultural differences and similarities between two countries. In order to have cross cultural understanding, we need to develop interpersonal understanding which is the desire to understand others. It is the ability to listen and accurately understand the thoughts, feelings, and problems of other people that cannot be fully uttered or delivered. This competency measures the complexity and depth of understanding of other people. This competency is also called cross-cultural sensitivity.

All human beings experience the same feeling when they travel to or live in a different country. Learning a foreign language is not apart from learning the culture of the language users. This helps us avoid making non-language mistakes, and assist us with knowledge to understand the native speakers of the language.

Actually, cross cultural understanding is basic to learning a foreign language. How to make communication with the native speakers of the language is very important to learn because there are many different expressions which cannot be translated word by word because it has a close connection with customs and culture, situations and conditions. One object of cross cultural understanding is to understand the relationships among countries.

It is now becoming an important issue to have cross cultural understanding among people living in this globalization era. Many conflicts occur in places whose residents do not care about cross cultural understanding. They tend to consider that their culture is good while other people's cultures are bad.

This is usually caused by lack of knowledge and experience in life. People who have traveled to various places having different cultural values usually have broader mind and better understanding about the differences that exist in other countries. They will not hastily make a wrong judgment concerning other cultures. They know that people living in varied cultures handle many daily things differently. Some differences are minor, and we can soon be accustomed to them. For example, clothing in America during the summer can startle Asian people when they see them wearing extremely short dresses or clothes for the first time. But soon they will understand it because the American people want to get cool by wearing such clothing.

Another thing that may startle Asian people is when someone invites them to have lunch or dinner in a restaurant. In Asia the person who invites will usually pay for the bill. But in America it is not necessarily true. They tend to split the bill unless the inviter states clearly that he will pay for the food and drink. As a consequence, everyone having lunch or dinner in a restaurant must have sufficient money to pay for the bill. Still another difference is in the habit of showing the entire house to guests. American people are happy to inspect each other's house. They would be glad to show the entire house from top to bottom to their guests or friends. In Asia people may show some parts of their houses but not all.

In America and in most European countries, time really matters because they consider it so precious that they have the expression: time is money. In Indonesia, people tend to relax too much and they rarely care about punctuality. Some foreigners joke and even mock about our culture concerning time by labeling it as rubber time since it can be stretched longer. With the advances in science and technology, we can observe different cultural values that exist all over the world. If we use our own value system to judge other cultures, there will be many things that seem terribly wrong. But of course it is not fair to judge other cultures using our own cultural values. We must let every culture run in its own value system and let us respect each other so that we can keep peace all around the world and avoid conflicts that may cause wars.

When people fight due to cultural differences, it indicates that they do not have enough knowledge and experience that are necessary in life. People who do not have enough knowledge and experience tend to be narrow-minded and intolerant to other people of different cultures.

Ideally, we may not force other people to follow our value system. We can practice or apply our value system in our own community, but we must let other people practice their own value system. In so doing, we do not need to worry about misunderstanding that may end up in conflicts.

Generally speaking, all human beings need to live in peace so that they can concentrate on their work and get prosperity in life. Wars must be prevented from happening at all times. The United Nations Organization must always care about world peace. The world's population must be given lessons on how to keep peace and prevent wars. Without learning to know other people's cultures, we will tend to be selfish, shallow, and stupid. When we know other cultures, we will realize that many things are so different and charming and the people are so nice and the customs are so interesting. Everyone needs to have positive attitudes and way of thinking. The different ways of doing things will look interesting to us when we have an open mind.

It is true that our ideas on how to behave were formed in our early years or during our childhood. We learned from our parents and surrounding community the standards that are applicable only in our own culture. We were taught that we were learning how to do things right. Our parents and surrounding community influence the development of our ideas and attitudes because we were educated using our own cultures since our childhood. Our families of origin, along with the communities to which we belong, have influenced the development of our ideas and attitudes. This process is called socialization. Depending on our exposure to different cultural groups during that time, we can make a number of untested cultural assumptions. These cultural assumptions can lead to cultural bias and misunderstanding. We automatically get used to our own cultural values. It is just natural that our way of thinking and attitudes are based on our daily experiences in the community.

But when we go to another country like the United States of America, we can see that people do things differently. In our view, their ways of doing things might look wrong and that can sometimes cause misunderstanding. People coming from different cultural backgrounds often have problems in understanding each other when they are not open to learn and accept the differences as variations in life. It is necessary for everyone to realize that what is acceptable in one culture might not be acceptable in another culture.

When someone is not open-minded, he may experience culture shock when he is surrounded by people of different cultures. He might get lost and does not know how to do things right. Even if he can speak the language, he simply cannot understand the way the people behave. Some people who experience culture shock may experience confusion, depression, anxiety, and resentment in varying degrees. They may become physically ill and they may feel annoyed easily.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF CROSS CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

Cultural understanding relates to a particular group of people and their habits, beliefs, traditions, etc. Normally, people coming from the same cultural background do not have problems in dealing with each other particularly in behaving and communicating to each other because they have common grounds and understanding. They were raised and educated by their parents to behave in accordance with the culture they all shared together right from their childhood that it became a habit to behave in certain manners as determined by their common culture.

Cross cultural understanding is more difficult to gain because we have to be able to compare between two or more different cultures or countries so that we know the similarities and differences that exist between them. By knowing the similarities and differences between two cultures, we will be able to adjust our behavior to those people we are facing. According to Wanning (1991), right and wrong are not meaningful terms in cultural matters. When we try to understand another culture, we will be able to see why people behave the way they do and therefore we will have a more positive attitude towards them. When in doubt, we can ask the people concerning their culture so that we can sympathize with them. By mixing with other people, we can learn their culture in real life situation. Of course, we must also be able to use their language because it is a part of culture. As long as we have an open mind, we will find some positive points in every culture.

In this paper I would like to present some comparisons between Indonesian cultures and American cultures in general. We know that in every country there are various cultural values that interact with each other but they can live in harmony. The more we interact with other people of different cultures, the better our perspectives will be towards them as long as we have an open mind and positive attitude. American people, particularly who live in cities, are in a rush most of the time as if they are always under pressure. They assume that everyone is equally competitive and self-sufficient. However, they are very kind to strangers and they are ready to help them. In contrast, Indonesian people are more relaxed in general as if there is nothing to hurry for and to worry about.

American people come from many different origins such as Black people, White people, Asian people, Indian people, Hispanic people, etc. They merge into the American stream in certain aspects of life but they keep to many of their customs and patterns socially at home. Indonesian people also have many different customs but most of them originate from the same country.

American people tend to be informal. They use first name address system most of the time signifying equality and solidarity. They do not always shake hands when meeting people. They just nod or smile instead. They do not have family titles. They might use occupational titles to address distinguished people, but in most cases they do not use them. Indonesian people, on the other hand, tend to be formal and they often use titles before or after their names signifying respect or deference especially for those people who have high status in the community. Most Indonesian people are proud to use family titles and academic degrees and they do not feel happy when others forget to use their titles when addressing them. Titles in

Indonesia give prestige to the holders and people try their best to gain as many titles as possible.

In daily relationships and interactions many people might have wrong assumptions about other people that have different cultures and these may cause biases and misunderstanding towards each other. In Indonesia many people create stereotypes to label certain ethnic group characteristics such as the following: Javanese people are slow-moving, Minang people are liars and tricky, Batak people are rough or rude, Melay people are lazy, etc. but of course they are wrong. We may not make such generalizations because they are not objective and they are not based on facts. Eventhough the expressions are used during a television or entertainment program, some people might take them seriously and form their own opinions. In other words, some people become biased towards certain ethnic groups and have negative attitudes towards them just because of the stereotyping that occurs in daily encounters. Stereotyping can cause prejudices that may result in misunderstanding and conflicts.

To avoid cultural biases and prejudices, we must accept the diversity of cultures. We must believe that diversities are beautiful and needed by human beings. In Indonesia we have the expression that states "Unity in Diversity". We are united as one nation although we have a lot of different cultural values all over the country. We need to understand each other so that we can live in harmony and peace. In reality, some people in Indonesia are biased about other cultures. They think that their culture is the best while other cultures are not good. As a result, they become subjective in assessing someone's competence and may underestimate other cultures because they make wrong assumptions and judgment about the abilities of other people.

Another way to avoid cultural biases is to expose ourselves to different experiences involving other cultures. When we move to a new country, we subconsciously start to adapt and get used to the new norms as time goes by. We do not even realize that we are making adjustment to the new culture. For example, when we go to the United States of America, we have to drive on the right side of the street just the opposite of Indonesian traffic regulations.

We need to adapt to the local language and the local way of speaking. It is very helpful when we participate in the local community's social activities or events. By being active in the local social interactions, we can understand the local customs, traditions, and we will learn to appreciate the differences. We do not need to be over conscious of being different because we are all different in certain ways. It will be boring if all of us are similar.

In addition, we need to improve our communication skills so that we can overcome culture shock that we might experience on the first encounter with the new culture. We need to socialize outside our own culture. Indeed, it is necessary to avoid limiting our social interactions within our own culture or community. We must be able to adapt to new situations.

However, the social adaptation happens much faster when we make conscious effort to interact with the local community which has a different culture. The social adaptation ability varies from person to person. Some people adapt to a new culture faster than others. Successful cross-cultural communication requires knowledge of a foreign language and foreign culture. Cross-cultural communication refers to adequate mutual understanding of participants of the communication belonging to different national cultures. Learning a foreign language is having the other point of view from which one had before in one's understanding of the world. He also believed that different languages are completely not various designations of the same thing. To achieve cross-cultural understanding, we need intercultural communication. Knapp defines it as the interpersonal interaction between members of different groups, which differ from each other in respect of the knowledge shared by their members and in respect of their linguistic forms of symbolic behavior.

Teaching the ability of cross-cultural understanding should become an integral part of language studies and it is especially important when the students come from mixture of people, languages, and cultures so that they can overcome a feeling of insufficiency or simply dissimilarity of other cultures. In order to be successful to carry out cross-cultural interaction,

students must have fluency in a foreign language. They must also study the features of culture related to customs, traditions, and way of life.

3. INTRODUCING CROSS CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING IN ESL CLASSES

The need to introduce the topic Cross-cultural understanding in the ESL classes or courses can be explained as follows: The modern world is becoming smaller all the time. Advances in transport and communication technology combined with the development of the world economy have resulted in people from different nations, cultures, languages and backgrounds now communicating, meeting and doing business with one another more than ever before. One of the strong motivations for studying English for modern students is the fact that English is the language of business and the language of international communication. Very few businesses can escape the need to deal with foreign colleagues, clients or customers. Students now understand that the ability to speak English will be a great advantage in making their career and in international business communication. But speaking English is not enough to be able to crack foreign markets. It is obvious that successful communication requires not just excellent foreign language skills, but also cross-cultural understanding. Successful cross-cultural communication assumes knowledge of a foreign language and foreign culture. Teaching the ability of cross-cultural understanding should take the leading place in language studies. Language doesn't exist out of the culture, i.e. out of socially inherited set of practical skills and the ideas characterizing the way of life. As social cultural structures are the basis of language structures, so it is necessary to know better the world of the studied language for active use of language as means of communication. It has been widely agreed in the language teaching profession that learners need not just knowledge and skill in the grammar of a language but also the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways. Intercultural skills and know-how include: 1.the ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other; 2. cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures; 3. the capacity to fulfill the role of cultural intermediary between one's own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations; 4. the ability to overcome stereotyped relationships.

Foreign languages become the means of communication between representatives of different people and cultures and they should be studied in unity with the world and cultures of the people speaking the languages. Learners need not only the knowledge and skill in the grammar of a language, but also the ability to use the language in socially appropriate ways.

To obtain cross-cultural understanding, we need to have intercultural awareness, intercultural skills, and existential competence. Intercultural awareness refers to knowledge, awareness and understanding of the relation between the world of origin and the world of the target community. It includes an awareness of the regional and social diversity of both worlds. It is also enriched by awareness of a wider range of cultures than those carried by the learners during the first language and second language learning processes.

Intercultural skills and know-how cover the ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other, cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures, the capacity to fulfill the role of cultural intermediary between one's own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations, and the ability to overcome stereotyped relationships. A foreign language teacher must be equipped with intercultural competence so that he can train the students to gain cross cultural understanding.

Intercultural competence refers to a unity of socio-cultural competence and socio-linguistic competence. The socio-cultural competence involves understanding of common cultural background, national culture of the country of studied language, and the knowledge of history, geography, infrastructure and the way different people live.

A teacher of a foreign language having experience of visiting the country of the studied language is the only carrier of socio-linguistic competence because he can inform the students about authentic rules of speech behavior. Intercultural language teaching and learning

emphasizes the interdependence of language and culture and the importance of intercultural understanding as a goal of language education. It is increasingly promoted as a way to develop learner's ability to negotiate meanings across languages and cultures and prepare the students for living in a multicultural world.

Cultural competence is an acknowledgment and incorporation of the importance of culture, assessment of cross-cultural relations, vigilance toward the dynamics that result from cultural differences, expansion of cultural knowledge, and adaptation of services to meet culturally unique needs on the part of business people. Some business people state that they interact with other business people in the same manner. Indeed, being culturally competent implies that business people do not treat other customers the same way, given the cultural dynamics each brings to the encounter. Cross-cultural understanding and cultural competence in business is essential to overcome cultural barriers between businessmen and customers in order to ensure effective goods delivery and business compliance. When misunderstood, cultural differences can adversely affect communication between businessmen and customers, and this can negatively impact business outcomes. Cultural competency requires empathy, curiosity and respect for other people's opinions and beliefs. A businessman does not have to agree with the particular beliefs of his customer but he must recognize that other opinions and explanations that exist regarding business besides the western business understanding. In this way, cultural competence and cross-cultural understanding is an important vehicle for achieving customer satisfaction, and improved business outcomes.

4. CONCLUSION

A foreign language teacher who has traveled to or stayed in the country where the language is used is the only carrier of socio-linguistic competence and can inform the students about authentic rules of speech behavior. Intercultural language teaching and learning emphasizes the interdependence of language and culture and the importance of intercultural understanding as a goal of language education. It is increasingly being promoted as a way to develop learners' ability to negotiate meanings across languages and cultures and prepare them for living in a multicultural world. The importance of developing intercultural communicative competence alongside linguistic competence has resulted from learners' needs for acquiring intercultural skills for cross-cultural communication in which they may encounter linguistic and cultural barriers. Teaching from an intercultural perspective involves developing in learners critical cultural awareness of their own culturally-shaped world view and behavior as well as the skills and attitudes to understand and successfully interact with people from other cultures to become interculturally as well as linguistically competent. ESL teachers need to shift from a traditional stance to an inter-cultural one to develop both linguistic and intercultural competences of learners. Following the modern tendencies of important intercultural language teaching, it is necessary to present Cross-Cultural Understanding as a course in ESL learning. Private and business spheres of life are connected with each other. Cross cultural understanding is very important for teachers and students of English as a foreign language. As we all know, language is a part of culture. When we really want to learn English as a foreign language, we must also learn the culture of the English native speakers.

Building relationships based on cultural diversity requires understanding and respect for cultural differences at individual and organizational levels. Cultural bias is often learned through socialization, and being unaware of personal bias may lead to discrimination, misunderstandings and conflicts. Recognising and respecting cultural differences can greatly improve relationships between people from culturally diverse backgrounds.

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